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GROUNDED PRACTICAL THEORY TO IMPROVE PERSISTENCE-RETENTION STRATEGIC ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The author introduces grounded practical theory (GPT) as a useful research approach in the field of strategic enrollment management (SEM) and its focus on persistence-retention. The GPT approach is then illustrated by engaging sample voices of persistence-retention and SEM; scientific theory (the philosophical level) and normative theory (the technical level) as observed in the literature. The scientific theory voices and normative theory voices are then positioned in relation to voices of students and practitioners (observed respondents) who have identified real world persistence-retention and SEM problems. These problems suggest implications for reconstructing the relationship between persistence-retention and SEM philosophical, theoretical, and problem levels. In that the GPT process culminates with the researcher presenting a grounded practical theory, a persistence-retention and SEM model of what "ought to be" in the first 100 days is presented for the purpose of stimulating discussion, beyond this article, among practitioners and academics.

INTRODUCTION

Strategic enrollment management (SEM), oriented toward improving both student and institutional success, is a rapidly evolving field within American higher education. Seminal scholarship to comprehend students' persistence to graduation, and to improve professional practice to support student and institutional enrollment success, emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. SEM scientific theory (basic research with philosophical implications) and normative theory (applied research with technical implications) greatly expanded in subsequent decades. This legacy of sophisticated SEM philosophies and techniques widely informed the "student success movement" (Borland, 2013) and the evolving SEM field.

However, in the 2010s SEM practice addresses physical, human, organizational, and conceptual interactions (Strange & Banning, 2015) within exponentially broader and more complex institutional and external systems (Birnbaum, 1988). As such, today's student and practitioner participants in persistence-retention and SEM continue to experience numerous SEM problems, issues of practice. These problems require more than a legacy of philosophies and

techniques, yielded through scientific theory (basic research, philosophies) and normative theory (applied research, techniques). These problems, issues cannot be completely addressed without a rational reconstruction that grounds persistence-retention and SEM practical theory. A rational reconstruction to ground persistence-retention and SEM practical theory can be approached through "Grounded Practical Theory" (GPT). GPT, developed within the field of communication studies, is a research approach that is focused on the interrelation of philosophical, technical, and problem levels of practice (Craig & Tracy, 1995).

The author provides an introduction of the paradigmatic and methodological constructs of GPT as a useful tool for research in the field of SEM. GPT is then illustrated by engaging sample voices of persistence-retention and SEM scientific theory (the philosophical level) and normative theory (the technical level) as observed in the literature. Those voices are then positioned in relation to voices of students and practitioners (observed respondents) who have identified real world persistence-retention and SEM problems, issues of practice in the field (the problem level) that suggest implications for reconstructing the relationship between persistence-retention and SEM philosophical, theoretical, and problem levels. The GPT process culminates with the researcher presenting a grounded practical theory, a persistence-retention and SEM model of what "ought to be" in the first 100 days, to stimulate discussion among practitioners and academics beyond this article.

METHODOLOGY: GROUNDED PRACTICAL THEORY

Simply stated, GPT results from the engagement of three voices; those of scientific theory (basic research with philosophical implications) and normative theory (applied research with technical implications), with voices of concerned participants (their problems, issues of practice). Robert T. Craig with Karen Tracy introduced GPT as a metatheoretical research model. GPT is philosophically, paradigmatically, and methodologically suited for theoretical and simultaneously highly applied disciplines that experience a tension between scientific theory (basic research with philosophical implications), normative theory (applied research with technical implications), and practice. For example, it has been found suitable for Craig's own discipline, communication studies (Craig & Tracy, 1995). As such, GPT holds promise for SEM.

Extending Aristotle's philosophy of the relationship between theory and practice, GPT views *praxis* (practical truth) as applied to practical disciplines that pursue *phronesis* (practical wisdom) or "the capacity to use good judgment in situations that require deliberation and choice." *Praxis* is placed in relation to *theoria* (scientific knowledge) and *poiesis* (practical arts) that "cultivates *techne* – skilled, technical know-how" identified with *praxis* (Craig & Tracy, 1995, p. 251). Paradigmatically and methodologically, and in contemporary research terminology, GPT extends Glaser and Strauss' "discovery of grounded theory" (Glaser & Staruss, 1967) that builds scientific theory through comparative qualitative research (Craig & Tracy, 1995, p.251).

The intention for GPT is to unite scientific theory and normative theory on a single continuum with situated morally and politically significant applied social and professional

practice. Doing so is paradigmatically needed because scientific theory alone is an "inadequate basis for relating theory to practice" as it "fails to address essential interpretive and moral dimensions of practice." Further, unless normative theory "informs reflective thinking by engaging with problems that practitioners actually face" it is not a promising alternative or completely satisfactory companion for scientific theory. Therefore, GPT is conceived and introduced as a "rational reconstruction of situated practices for the purpose of informing further practice and reflection," "a more fruitful interaction [discourse] between … theory and practice" on that continuum (Craig & Tracy, 1995, p. 264).

> Rational reconstruction involves not just generalization but idealization and rationalization of practices. Theory construction, therefore, requires critique, revision, and elaboration of the reasoned basis of techniques, problems, and situated ideals involved in practice. Techniques, problems, and philosophical principles of intellectual discussion, for example, are proposed … to contribute to the social process in which the norms that govern the practice evolve (Craig & Tracy, 1995, p. 265).

As such, GPT is a research model suited to improve scientific theory, normative theory, and practice, and the relationship between theory and practice not only in communication studies, as illustrated by Craig, but also in higher education SEM. Like communication studies, SEM is a theoretically (scientific and normative) informed and simultaneously highly applied discipline. As in communication studies, in contemporary SEM there exists various degrees of tension between basic SEM research (scientific theory), applied SEM research (normative theory), and local SEM practice. There remain significant, contemporary SEM problems, issues of practice; particularly, in regard to continuing shortcomings in college student persistence and collegiate institutional retention of students. Among persistence-retention and SEM scientific theorists, there are new tensions regarding, for example, diversity, social capital, etc. Persistence-retention and SEM campus leaders and consultants contribute to the tensions by intensely guarding proprietary persistence-retention and SEM normative knowledge (techniques) in their competitions for students and clients, respectively. The confluence of such tension within scientific and normative theory (philosophical and technical) further intersect with the problematic realities of a widening array of frontline practitioners from throughout collegiate institutions who are charged to actually implement transactional and transformational persistence and retention and SEM practices.

"In any such domain, the development of grounded practical theory would yield proposals about the nature of … problems, techniques, and philosophical ideals that should guide praxis. These proposals would not (and could not) dictate what should be done but would seek to inform practical reflection and stimulate further discussion among practitioners and academics alike." GPT seeks to align the ideal practices and actual practices to articulate potential structural and strategic opportunities to improve practice. GPT "attempts to generate new and more practically

relevant normative ideals [of "what ought to be," "a guide to the conduct and criticism of practice" (p. 249)] through rational reconstruction of situated ideals discovered in the discourse of practitioners" (Craig & Tracy, 1995, pp. 268-69).

In a methodological sense, "practical action depends on an interpretive understanding of situations and requires deliberation about purposes and moral standards (normative reflection) as well as means (technical rationality)" (Craig & Tracy, 1995, p.249). With the intention that theory can better address "actual problems and requirements" (p. 250) "in the everyday world" (p. 265), theories "related to practice are explored through a close interpretive analysis" (p. 250). GPT seeks to meld moral argument with empirical observation in a way most discourse analysis does not, "proposing ideas about what ought to be" (p. 266), and attempting "to generate new and more practically relevant normative ideals through rational reconstruction of situated ideals discovered in the discourse of practitioners" (p. 267).

While Craig utilizes methodological techniques such as intellectual discussion, interviews with practitioners, and "recorded instances of practice" to generate data for analyses, he states that GPT "requires methodological trailblazing" (p. 267). However, regarding the approach to rational reconstruction, Craig states that it should be practiced at three interrelated theoretical levels.

1. The technical level: At the most concrete level, a practice can be reconstructed as a repertory of specific … strategies and techniques that are routinely available to be employed within the practice.
2. The problem level: Intrinsic to very practice are certain problems or dilemmas that affect the use of specific techniques. Techniques, it may be assumed, are invented and used in response to the problems and dilemmas that practitioners encounter. Hence, at a second level, a practice can be reconstructed as a problem logic or interrelated web of problems that practitioners experience and that bring forth both normative reflection (at the philosophical level) as well as strategic action (at the technical level).
3. The philosophical level: At the most abstract level, a practice can be reconstructed in the form of elaborated normative ideals and overarching principles that provide a rationale for the resolution of problems. In reflecting on what to do about a problem, alternative "situated ideals" may be available from which to derive reasons for resolving the problem in one way or another, accepting certain trade-offs among competing goals, and thus choosing to use certain … strategies and techniques rather than others. A practice can thus be reconstructed by articulating these situated ideals as explicit philosophical positions. (Craig & Tracy, 1995, pp. 253-54).

GPT provides "reasoned normative models – rational reconstructions – to inform praxis and critique," to address "problems in the everyday world" (Craig & Tracy, 1995, p.265). Considering philosophical, technical, and problem levels, GPT is fitting to address the problems observed across recent decades in the practice of SEM; particularly, those shortcomings related to first-year student persistence-retention.

GPT engages sample voices scientific theory (the philosophical level) and normative theory (the technical level) as observed in the literature. The scientific theory voices and normative theory voices are then positioned in relation to voices of participants who have identified real world problems. To further illustrate GPT, the philosophical level voices and technical level voices of persistence-retention and SEM are observed in the literature prior to placing them in relation to students and practitioners (observed respondents) who have identified real world persistence-retention and SEM problems.

LITERATURE: SEM VOICES AT PHILOSOPHICAL AND TECHNICAL LEVELS

Among others of influence in the 1970s and 1980s, a noteworthy scientific theory voice (basic research with philosophical implications) and a normative theory (applied research with technical implications) voice were introduced in regard to student persistence and institutional retention of students. Astin's Theory of Involvement and I-E-O Model (1970a, 1970b) accentuated the interface of the students themselves or the individual student's *inputs* (I), with the institutional *environment* (E) of collegiate experiences and institutional interventions, and the resulting *outcomes* (O) of student success of that interface. Astin's model was the first to significantly, broadly voice the student-institution relationship and remains a philosophical framework for much persistence and retention research.

Noel, Levitz, Saluri, and Associates (1985) provided a guiding technical framework for the practice of SEM. Their scholarship gave a voice of technical advice for campus-based persistence-retention and SEM practice, a voice that soon extended to many institutions via their nationally influential network of consultations.

Respectively, the voices of these scholars' scientific (philosophical) and normative (technical) theories impacted and still impact the philosophical and technical levels of persistence-retention and SEM at the practice level.

Persistence-Retention

For example, numerous persistence-retention theories/models are conceptually rooted in Astin's I-E-O Model. Tinto (1994) presents a longitudinal model of voluntary institutional departure that includes student characteristics and goals, interfaces and integrations within the academic and the social systems of the institution, and the balance of intentions, and commitments within and beyond the institution. Bean and Eaton (2000) present a psychological model of student departure that accentuates the student's psychological processes and outcomes within the environment that shape outcomes, attitudes of fit and loyalty, and intention and behavior regarding persistence.

Elaborating on Astin's environment (E), Strange and Banning (2001, 2015) use an ecological model to assess the influence of four intersecting collegiate environments (physical, human aggregate, organizational, constructed) that impact student and institutional learning,

growth, and development. They consider the interface of the student with the environment in terms of attraction and persistence. Their approach has become a standard for broadly understanding the student-institution interface.

Borland's (2001-2002) paradigms of improving retention is a paradigmatic discussion of the institution's economical, academic/learning, and student affairs/development frameworks, and the student's persistence frameworks of curricular/certification and social/connection objectives. Terenzini and Reason (2005) present the "parsing the first year of college" conceptual framework for studying the impacts of precollege characteristics and experiences, and their college experience (organizational context and peer environment) on the outcomes of learning, development, change, and persistence.

SEM

The development of SEM, at the philosophical and technical levels beyond that offered by Noel, Levitz, Saluri, and Associates (1985), continued in the 1990s. A philosophically foundational encapsulation of SEM as an organizational function was voiced by Hossler, Bean, and Associates (1990) who addressed SEM as an ongoing, systemic approach to managing enrollments. Also, Gardner with Barefoot and others established what would become the National Resource Center for the Freshman Year Experience and Students in Transition, a voice that created national intentionality about and technical support for the success of first year students (http://www.sc.edu/fye/).

In the first decade of the 21st century, Black (2001) voiced the importance of revolutionizing SEM through strategic thinking and operationalization. Bontrager (2004, 2005) described SEM's increasingly complex variety of concepts, structures, and techniques of practice and the need to build a solid foundation of concepts, structures, and strategies" (Bontrager, 2004, p. 11). Then Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005) published their significant scholarship on the institutional conditions (philosophies and techniques) that were found to be most beneficial interventions for student success.

These and many more voices of philosophical level and technical level scholarship impacted national persistence-retention and SEM at the practice level. While each decade of persistence-retention and SEM research was being conducted, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005, 2016 anticipated) systematically reviewed that body of scholarship to analyze how college affects students. Their meta-analyses became authoritative voices of the philosophical and technical levels, and significantly influenced persistence-retention and SEM philosophical and technical decisions regarding practice across the country.

OBSERVED RESPONDENTS AND IMPLICATIONS: SEM VOICES AT THE PROBLEM LEVEL

Given nearly 50 years of highly valued scientific research and normative research in the literature, and professional practice, one would reasonably assume persistence-retention and SEM

philosophies and techniques have been assessed to the point of near perfection; implemented, analyzed, evaluated, and improved to now achieve the greatest student and institutional outcomes related to enrollment. However, in the last decade several phenomenon related to the philosophical level and the technical level have generated problems, issues of practice contributing to the rise of voices of concern at the real world problem level of persistence-retention and SEM work.

Simply stated, there is a degree of disconnection between the philosophical level ideals, technical level ideals, and problem level implementations of persistence-retention and SEM. These practice-related problems, implications beg to be addressed if persistence-retention and SEM work are to become more effective. This is particularly important in regard to the continuing, high stakes problem of lower than desired levels of student persistence and institutional retention of students.

Reason (2009) approached that problem via an excellent qualitative analysis of the literature, yielding implications for studying and improving persistence with scientific and normative research. Pointing to the irony of the contemporary problem, he very-well stated the problem regarding persistence and retention. "Unfortunately, efforts to improve [persistence and] retention seem to be ineffective; attrition rates have endured despite significant efforts to close them" (Reason, 2009, p. 659).

To a degree, many persistence-retention and SEM problems, issues of practice voiced below have been noted in the literature. However, to a greater degree, they have been voiced in the author's decades of engagement with persistence-retention and SEM leadership, overseeing persistence-retention and SEM at two universities; including the practice of SEM vice presidents and consultants, engagement with students and family members, and supporting professionals charged to implement philosophical notions and technical strategies to improve student persistence and institutional retention of students. The problems have also been voiced by professionals engaged in the author's persistence-retention and SEM scholarship; by his co-teachers and professional students in several graduate courses related to persistence-retention and SEM, and by several hundred persistence-retention and SEM practitioners attending his peer-reviewed workshops and conference sessions.

The following is a voicing of those problems, issues of practice relative to the philosophical level and/or the technical level. The voices come from practice, observation and moral argument. To better demonstrate their relationship to theory, they are thematically keyed to Astin's I-E-O Model; input problems, environment problems, and output problems.

Input Problems and Implications

Individual Inputs Knowledge Problem — When considering student inputs in relation to potential philosophical and technical persistence-retention and SEM interventions, regardless of the intention of the theory, there is a tendency in practice to primarily consider student cohort inputs rather than individual student inputs.

This may be driven by most of the influential philosophical and technical inputs scholarship being conducted with big data, large and sometimes nationally representative samples; e.g., The

CIRP Freshman Survey (Cooperative Institutional Research Program of the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA) and the National Survey of Student Engagement (National Survey of Student Engagement of the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University). In practice, the primary focus on cohort rather than individual student inputs is often done because real resource limitations (money, time, personnel, data collection and analyses, etc.) restrain local professionals' ability to know their individual students' inputs at the outset of their time with the institution.

Few persistence-retention and SEM plans, training, budgets, cadres of professionals, and interventions are primarily oriented to consider and meet the inputs and related needs of individual students. This is problematic, forcing observations about an incoming class' cohort inputs to become assumptions made about individual student inputs that often support "one size fits all" interventions.

Access Expansion to New Inputs and Social Capital Problem — The expansion of students accessing higher education with non-traditional inputs means numerous persistence-retention and SEM philosophies and techniques (based on studies of traditional majority students) can no longer be broadly applied to new, more diverse cohorts of students. The problem is that persistence-retention and SEM practitioners must now move from dependence on philosophical level and technical level legacy comprehension of the typical student body at their institutions to focus research and practice on more diverse student sub-populations and individuals whose inputs they may not yet comprehend.

Further, among today's students there is a growing dissimilarity of social capital inputs that differentiate persistence-retention results. This suggests a need for new professional knowledge, skills, and programs tailored to work with individual students and their specific social capital inputs. Bourdieu (1973, 1986) oriented social capital to yield economic and dominant cultural capital; attitudes, behaviors, credentials, education, and possessions required to promote social mobility. To Coleman (1988), social capital was oriented toward creating human capital; agency, skills, knowledge, and abilities to influence one's own outcomes.

Oriented toward upward social mobility and positively influencing one's own outcomes, the theory of social capital has become important in its application to student persistence and institutional retention. Almeida (Tierney & Duncheon, 2015), illustrating social capital as a basis for persistence-retention in higher education, infers the value of educators and others helping to develop individual students' social capital. In particular, developing the social capital of low income youth so they may become college ready. Higher education has responded to lack of social capital with remedial and developmental coursework; but, it has not found an effective, practical, proactive solution to this input problem level concern.

Environment Problems and Implications

Proprietary Information and Intervention Problem — The field of SEM, including student persistence-retention, often devolves into inter-institution competition for quantitative and/or

qualitative enrollment-related improvement (growth, revenue, selectivity, completion, rankings, etc.) and between persistence-retention and SEM consultants who seek improved market position for the sale of their services and products. Consequently, persistence-retention and SEM information is very proprietary. While what is known through scholarship is likely the vast majority of information that is broadly and freely disseminated, that distribution is often slow and limited. Cutting-edge persistence-retention and SEM information, philosophies and techniques used on campuses, is bought from consultants, "borrowed" from institutions whose assessment reports show promise, or it is the result of homespun experiments. The guarding and expense of this largely unpublished, proprietary information is a practice problem that persistence-retention and SEM philosophical and technical literature and leaders have not yet addressed for the sake of improving persistence-retention and SEM interventions for all students.

SEM Proliferation and Intervention Problem — In the last decade, SEM strategically proliferated to increasingly span more institutions' internal and external system boundaries. In particular, SEM expanded into the frontiers of higher education institutions' finance and administration, student affairs functional areas (Dungy, 2003), the academy, and governance, as well as institutions' direct engagement with external political and market force voices.

This proliferation came via persistence-retention and SEM voices (philosophical and technical) becoming more easily accessible than ever via the Internet, making the scientific theory and normative theory widely available to and known among more practitioners. However, the proliferation of SEM throughout the institutional organization occurred with the strong support (if not direction) of administrations and governments constantly driven to improve enrollment matters, reaching a new high point of intentionality to generate more student and institutional success related to enrollment.

The proliferation into new organizational frontiers expanded the number and kind of units, functional areas, and professionals engaging persistence-retention and SEM. This revealed the complexity of the philosophies and techniques in the now expansive environment of persistence-retention and SEM practice, but it also proliferated more problems, issues of practice voiced by student and professional participants. The problem is that philosophies, techniques, and the practice have not keep pace with the proliferation of SEM.

Organizational Change Problem — As organizations, institutions of higher education are a system of internal, loosely coupled units that change in increasing complexity and dynamics within and between themselves (Birnbaum, 1988; Kezar, 2001). As environments for persistence-retention and SEM work, institutions and their units change in terms of places and spaces, characteristics and groupings of engaged people, arrangements of work (policy, procedure, resources, interventions, etc.), and in culture, climate, and other constructs such as philosophy (Strange & Banning, 2015). An institution's philosophical ideals of persistence-retention and SEM are ultimately found in the perspectives of its president (Borland & Colom, 2012); however, the length of presidencies has shortened, and often with that significant organizational change in leadership there is a change in persistence-retention and SEM philosophy and techniques. Most

philosophical and technical approaches to persistence-retention and SEM do not consider organizational change problems for students and practitioners.

Unit Collaboration Problem — Even with proliferation, SEM leaders often have limited authority to direct, resource, and reward the work of specialized units from elsewhere in the institution's organizational chart. These units' collaboration could generate significant contributions but such units could be limited by their own practitioner competencies and responsibilities as functional areas within student affairs, academic departments, physical plant, etc. Consequently, in those units there is limited devotion to additional persistence-retention and SEM objectives and tasks, to engage persistence-retention and SEM training and development (philosophical and technical), and there are fewer valued intrinsic and extrinsic rewards for persistence-retention and SEM engagement. Without complete collaboration, there can be little connection to a persistence-retention and SEM master plan, little communication between units to avoid duplications or gaps and to complement the work of others, and there can be confusion about who is directing the work. In practice, the unit collaboration problem begs for constant attention beyond the philosophical level and the theoretical level.

Outcome and Intervention Breadth Problems — Most persistence-retention and SEM interventions in the environment of an institution, linked to the philosophical level or the technical level, are broadly and generically applied to students as though "one size fits all." Student-specific interventions are important but less common.

This may be a problem rooted in the otherwise esteemed Student Success Movement that initially championed institutions' whole person attention to students throughout their first year to enhance their persistence-retention. It then pressed for continuous improvement throughout the student's entire collegiate experience and life, the student lifecycle from junior high school and throughout their life as alumni. Today, that whole person, lifecycle focus on "student success" is a laudable, ubiquitous, broadly understood outcome and occupation of institutions of higher education (Borland, 2013). The problem is, practitioners see that outcome more often matched with institutional rhetoric than it has been met with institutional capacity building to comprehensively intervene to achieve the entire, broad outcome. The whole person, lifecycle outcome is too broad and so are the attempted interventions.

Outcome Problems and Implications

Longitudinal Outcome Problem — Institutions of higher education typically design persistence-retention and SEM interventions that are longitudinal as is the case in much philosophical and technical scholarship (e.g., degree attainment, liberal education, career achievement, quality of life, lifelong learning, etc.) rather than short-term, narrowly focused persistence-retention and SEM outcomes. It is a problem to not practice setting and reaching short-term persistence-retention and SEM outcomes that could contribute to achieving long-term outcomes.

To illustrate, "The Rule of the First Sixes" for persistence-retention (Borland, 2016), developed from observations of students and families, suggests there are numerous critically important persistence-retention junctures or decision-points in the first six weeks and beyond that should be linked to specific short-term outcomes. Doing so with short-term outcome interventions will improve individual student's first six minutes, hours, days, weeks, and months, as well as longitudinal institutional persistence-retention and SEM outcomes. These are those persistence-retention decision points with voiced outcome issues. The first six …

> Minutes — Where can we park to unload, are these people friendly, am I already lost?
>
> Hours — Have I found my room, had a good experience with a roommate, been made to feel welcome and safe, been able to get a meal, missed my family?
>
> Days — Have I found all of my classes and felt confident, are the syllabi overwhelming, have I found people I can consider friends, am I functioning ok away from home?
>
> Weeks — Am I successful a third-to-half way through my first term of coursework, am I connecting to this place and the people and organizations, is college for me, can I find answers or support when I need it, do I want to come back for another term?
>
> Months — Is my career plan working out relative to my academic progress and what I now know about myself, how is my money situation, as much as I miss home is this place feeling like "my home away from home"?

The voices of students, families, and practitioners express that viewing outcomes primarily as long-range is a problem that limits student and practitioner motivation for and attention to immediate and/or short-term persistence-retention and SEM decision points and outcomes issues that may, if left unaddressed, significantly handicap progress toward longitudinal outcomes.

The "Iron Triangle" Outcome Problem — Outside of the best philosophical models and the best technical suggestions, the problem is that there is no practice to perfectly balance the outcomes of access, affordability, and assurance of quality. The 2010s began as a time of stressful economics for most students and institutions, and internal and external stakeholders alike demanded higher levels of these three outcomes thought to yield better student persistence-retention, SEM, student success, institutional accountability to families and the country, etc. Assurance, access, and affordability became known as "the iron triangle" of SEM and were championed by new voices; especially, voices in government (Duncan, 2011).

The voices of practitioners at the problem level expressed that practicing initiatives to positively address any one laudable outcome of the triangle would generate an imbalance with or negative impact upon one or both of the other outcomes of the triangle (Immerwahr, Johnson, & Gasbarra, 2008). Practitioners were faced with a "no-win" dilemma related to three excellent, demanded outcomes.

Student Accountability Outcome Problem — As external stakeholders demanded greater institutional accountability related to persistence-retention and SEM, most institutions of higher education and the units within them made accountability a high priority and provided many reports to demonstrate their commitments, challenges, and successes. Governments, accreditors, rankings organizations, and families eagerly consumed them. However, most stakeholders did not request and most institutions did not design systems of increased, shared student accountability for achieving persistence-retention and SEM outcomes. This is a problem in practice, when one party is laden with responsibility for the other's success (as individuals, cohorts, and as institution) and the other, collectively and individually, is not sharing responsibility for those same outcomes. The problem in persistence-retention and SEM practice is a low level of student accountability.

DISCUSSION OF A GROUNDED PRACTICAL THEORY, WHAT OUGHT TO BE: FIRST 100 DAYS PERSISTENCE-RETENTION SEM MODEL

The first phase of GPT methodology yielded a reflective critique of persistence-retention and SEM at philosophical, technical, and problem levels. Given all of the above problems, it is fair to say that persistence-retention and SEM is a very theoretical and simultaneously highly applied discipline with numerous inherent problems that surface in practice. There is an experiential tension between its scientific theory (basic research with philosophical implications), its normative theory (applied research with technical implications), and its practice.

The GPT process continues the reconstruction of the relationship between persistence-retention and SEM theory and practice, by contributing a grounded practical theory (in this case, a model) to inform further discussion of practice. Doing so proposes one idea of "what ought to be" by generating "new and more practically relevant normative [technical] ideals …." (Craig & Tracy, 1995, pp. 266-67). To improve praxis via "practical reflection," the grounded practical theory (this model) is generated to stimulate "further discussion among practitioners and academics" (Craig & Tracy, 1995, p. 268-69).

The author has delimited the scope of the "First 100 Days Persistence-Retention and SEM Model" to new students and to six of the above I-E-O problems, issues of practice.

Inputs — The Individual Inputs and Social Capital Problems

Environments — The SEM Proliferation and Collaboration Problems

Outcomes — The Longitudinal and the Student Accountability Outcome Problems

Basically, the model responds to these six problems via these required components. Each is elaborated upon below.

Focus on individual students,

Incorporate coordinated interventions from all organizational units of the institution,

Target a short period of time, and

Hold students accountable as partners.

Individual and Social Capital Problems: Focus on Individual Students

Analyze individual student's inputs (I); attending to every specific student and their human aggregate identity, academic and relational ability, pre-college experiences, life skill and higher education social capital, predisposition to academic and social engagement, level of risk relative to persistence-retention, financial status, family, aspirations, avocations, and other individual characteristics. Because the balance of the model pivots on this work being mastered by all persons who will engage the student, it is the first priority within the model. So, create the capacity to acquire, disseminate, and use the inputs information, and mandate that this responsibility be met by all engaged practitioners.

Knowing each student in this way, analyze their inputs and intervene to improve each student's characteristics and persistence-retention at pre-college (recruitment, admission, orientation) and at each of the "First Sixes" (above) persistence decision points. Give special attention to the student's life skill and higher education social capital, as it is influential in terms of college readiness, at each of the "First Sixes" persistence decisions points, and in the development of new social capital prior to reaching the next of the "First Sixes" persistence decision points.

Proliferation and Collaboration Problems: Coordinate Collaboration from All Units

This portion of the plan is informed by the individual inputs considered above and involves the engagement of all units of the institution; including, all functional areas of finance and administration, student affairs, academic, advancement, marketing and communication, enrollment, athletic, executive, and auxiliary unit personnel, and select community members. As such, each unit must be provided with information about individual students' inputs and must be trained, resourced, and extended invigorating goals and motivational rewards that align with their function, expertise, culture, and interventions they will contribute.

The individual input information must be coordinated and accessible to leaders and innovation designers within all of the units. Then unit teams and cross-unit teams can design large, small, and individual interventions aimed at strategically improving each student's persistence-retention. Among all of each student's input-related objectives for interventions by each unit, student social capital acquisition, development, and utilization must also be strategically addressed.

This portion of the plan required the proliferation of persistence-retention and SEM into all units, and each unit's collaboration with others to provide effective resources to each other and effective interventions to each student.

Longitudinal Outcome Problem: Target the "First 100 Days"

This is a high priority, time sensitive need: The model uses a short-term strategy with long-term benefits. Undergirded by tradition more than science, there are two models for accomplishing high priority, time sensitive actions with urgency and energy across a short period of time. They are motivationally and practically useful to higher education institutions seeking to immediately improve persistence-retention and SEM. One, "The First 100 Days" is a motivational and practical model used by American presidents, and by businesses divesting or acquiring a business. The other, "The first six weeks," is a higher education parallel that has long been related to first year persistence-retention and SEM.

Franklin D. Roosevelt was the first American president to use the first 100 days strategy to urgently and energetically implement a high priority, time sensitive agenda. In his *First Inaugural Address* (Roosevelt, 1933), he spoke of urgency, immediacy, and action to a desperate nation experiencing "The Great Depression" and global unrest that soon led to World War II.

> There are many ways in which it can be helped, but it can never be helped merely by talking about it. We must act and act quickly. …
>
> These are the lines of attack. I shall presently urge upon a new Congress in special session detailed measures for their fulfillment, and I shall seek the immediate assistance of the several States. Through this program of action we address ourselves to putting our own national house in order … the (sic) emergency at home cannot wait. …
>
> It is the way to recovery. It is the immediate way. It is the strongest assurance that the recovery will endure.

An immediate, three-month legislative-executive blitz, the "Hundred Days," yielded the most wide-sweeping passing of legislation ever observed in such a concentrated period of time. The strategy was so effective, later presidents are judged by accomplishments in their first 100

days. Famously, John F. Kennedy's *Inaugural Address* (Kennedy, 1961) expressed this. "All this will not be finished in the first 100 days. Nor will it be finished in the first 1,000 days, nor in the life of this Administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin."

Businesses use the first 100 days strategy in the divesting or acquisition of businesses. The first 100 days are "… the most important days post-close because the acquired company is more disposed to handle change. This propensity is simply due to the expectation of change by most employees, and consequently delivers the most energy from those same employees for a buyer to implement change that can realize immediate value." The catalyzing of growth and the "low hanging fruit" of improvement can be quickly initiated, and "value can be created or risk mitigated" in relation to "retention" of customers and employees, "and making sure cultures are properly aligned" (Divestopedia, n.d.).

"The first six weeks" is an often cited belief in higher education that the end of the first six-weeks of a student's first term at an institution is a crossroads for success to persistence. Betsy Barefoot (personal correspondence, 2001), a national leader in first-year student persistence and interventions, held that there was no science to support this perception of the first six weeks. Given the contemporary economy, attendance patterns, and diversity of students, that may be truer today. However, there remains a traditional belief in "the first six weeks."

"The Rule of the First Sixes" for persistence-retention and SEM (Borland, 2016) suggests there are numerous critically important persistence-retention and SEM junctures or decision-points leading to the first six weeks and beyond, making a strategic, rapid approach to persistence-retention issues and interventions advantageous during those first days. "The Rule of the First Sixes" is that persistence-retention and SEM will be influenced and must be improved by interventions within the individual student's first six minutes, hours, days, weeks, and months at the institution. Those decision points were already listed with simple illustrations (above).with illustrative questions. Target the first 100 days.

Student Accountability Problem: Make Students Accountable Partners

The model requires student interactions with and interventions by each unit to be conducted at pre-college and at each of the "First Sixes" persistence-retention decision points. Beyond required student participation and engagement, the model requires students to be accountable partners for its implementation and success.

Tell each student the plan designed specifically for their success, that their success will be due to a 100 day institution-student partnership, and that the partnership requires their sincere spirit of co-ownership, their investment of significant time and great energy, and that they exercise prioritized urgency, and great energy in institution interventions and student expectations. Require and monitor student interfaces with the environment to analyze and refine interventions, to improve each student's interface with the institution; especially, with the institution's physical, human aggregate, organization, and constructed environments. This requires the student to also be involved in monitoring and improving the institution's and their own contributions.

The student must be aware of their own characteristics (inputs) as well as their own experiences within and beyond the institution; especially, their interface with the physical, human aggregate, organizational, and constructed environments, and their need of additional social capital. Each student must engage the interventions and self-report in a way so as to make all institutional practitioners aware of their needs and progress. Self-reporting to peer-mentors and family members can also be powerful for encouraging challenge and support. Self-reporting develops ownership that can enhance persistence-retention.

Discussion

Grounded practical theories, such as the model above, are generated to stimulate "further discussion among practitioners and academics." No persistence-retention and SEM model is perfect. For example, this one is philosophical and technical to a limited degree, it addresses some but not all of the problems of practice identified above, it wants for detail, and strikes fear in the hearts of those who have not before generated and implemented such humanly intensive and resource expensive initiatives, etc.

However, it does suggest a different and perhaps better balance between the philosophical level, technical level, and practice level of persistence-retention and SEM. It does provide numerous points upon which to initiate new research, new practice, and new debates among scholars and practitioners. It also demonstrates that GPT can be a useful tool to improve persistence-retention and SEM as a field. It provides what, according to Craig and Tracy (1995) GPT intends; a plausible reconstruction of the relationship between persistence-retention and SEM theory and practice, proposes one idea of "what ought to be" via "practical reflection," and it should stimulate "further discussion among practitioners and academics."

CONCLUSION

GPT is a research approach that has been constructive in the field of communication studies and, given the above, GPT as a research approach appears to have merit for the emerging field of SEM as well as its focus on student persistence and institutional retention of students. When scientific theory (basic research, philosophies) and normative theory (applied research, techniques) are sound but do not completely contribute to or conform to the emerging realities experienced by practitioners, GPT is a valuable tool to examine that relationship.

The proposed model, a grounded practical theory for the first 100 days of persistence-retention and SEM work with first year students, addresses the theories and seeks to reconstruct their relationship with real world practice. In the ideal this model may never be completely implementable; however, in the ideal it encourages and sets up scholars and practitioners for a new dialogue focused on improving persistence-retention and SEM philosophical and technical levels as well as practice.

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